



Review Highlights JIU/REP/2025/5
JIU/REP/2025/5 [Expanded report]
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REVIEW OF THE OMBUDSMAN AND MEDIATION FUNCTION IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM ORGANIZATIONS

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Background

The ombudsman and mediation function with its mandate for informal conflict resolution is a key component of the system of administration of justice of the United Nations system and complements its formal part. It provides confidential, impartial, and independent services to address and resolve workplace-related concerns, thus contributing to the broader internal justice system and fostering organizational culture. The function supports early resolution of employment-related disputes, identifies systemic issues, and promotes trust and engagement throughout the workforce.

This review builds on the findings of the 2015 JIU report on organizational ombudsman services (JIU/REP/2015/6) and the 2023 JIU report of internal pre-tribunal appeal mechanisms (JIU/REP/2023/2). The function has evolved significantly since the 2015 JIU report, with increased professionalization, expanded mandates, and broader access for affiliated personnel. Despite measurable progress, challenges remain in ensuring independence, adequate resourcing, consistent reporting, and equitable access in the various duty stations.



Objectives & Purpose

The review aimed to provide a system-wide, comparative and independent assessment of the current state of the ombudsman and mediation function across JIU participating organizations, to identify good practices and areas for improvement. It examined progress made since the 2015 JIU report, the evolution of policy frameworks, mandates, organizational structures, and resourcing. The review also analyzed inter-agency cooperation and coherence.



What the JIU found

1. Progress since 2015

Since the 2015 JIU review, three additional organizations (UNRWA, FAO and ICAO) have established internal stand-alone ombudsman and mediation functions. Other entities introduced alternative arrangements, including shared service models and external service providers. The creation of the Network of United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators has further contributed to harmonizing practices and enhancing system-wide coherence.

Despite these developments, the review identified persistent shortcomings in the current arrangements. Several organizations have yet to fully implement key recommendations from the 2015 report. Notably, field staff in many entities still lack access to ombudsman services at their duty stations. In addition, regular reporting of ombudsman activities to governing bodies remains inconsistent. The Inspector considers it essential to further strengthen the function, given its important role in promoting informal conflict resolution, supporting organizational culture, and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the United Nations system.

2. Added value of the ombudsman and mediation function

The review confirmed the significant added value of the ombudsman and mediation function in promoting early and informal resolution of workplace disputes. Data from organizations demonstrated that most conflicts are resolved informally, often before escalating to formal levels. This contributes to substantial cost savings, given the high financial and administrative burden associated with pre-tribunal and tribunal proceedings.

Beyond cost-effectiveness, the function plays a critical role in fostering a respectful and harmonious workplace culture. Its contribution to conflict prevention, trustbuilding and organizational learning is broadly recognized and valued throughout the system.

3. Organizational set-up

The review identified a diverse range of models for delivering ombudsman and mediation services, including internal stand-alone offices, shared services, and external providers. While some models reflect good practices, others lack the necessary independence, professional standards, or geographic reach. In some cases, the function is embedded within human resources or ethics offices, raising concerns about impartiality and conflict of interest.

4. Terms of reference are lacking or outdated

The review found that while most organizations have developed terms of reference for their ombudsman and mediation functions, some entities still lack formal documentation. Where terms of reference exist, they are often outdated and do not reflect the actual scope and responsibilities of the function. The Inspector stresses the importance of ensuring that ToRs remain relevant, and reflective of evolving mandates and operational realities. She underlines the need for organizations without ToRs to develop and adopt them **(Recommendation 1)**.

5. Institutional and operational independence is not consistently ensured

The review found that in several organizations, key safeguards to ensure the independence of the ombudsman and mediation function are lacking. Staff representatives are not consistently involved in the selection and appointment of ombudsman heads, nor in decisions concerning their dismissal or removal. This absence of participation undermines transparency and may affect perceptions of independence and trust in the function. Additionally, in some organizations, heads of the function are appointed on successive short-term contracts rather than a single full-term appointment, weakening operational independence and security of tenure. The review also noted that a number of organizations have not established term limits or post-employment restrictions, which are widely recognized as good practices to safeguard independence and prevent conflicts of interest **(Recommendations 2, 3 and 4)**.

6. Reporting and transparency remain inconsistent

The review found that while most ombudsman and mediation functions produce annual reports, only a few organizations present these reports to their respective governing bodies or legislative organs.

This limits institutional oversight, including on systemic issues identified. In some organizations, annual reports are treated as internal documents and are not made publicly available, which limits transparency and broader awareness of the function’s role and responsibilities **(Recommendations 5 and 6)**. Furthermore, only a few organizations issue formal management responses to the findings in ombudsman reports. Not doing so, is considered a missed opportunity to address systemic issues and demonstrate leadership commitment to informal conflict resolution.

7. Capacity and resources remain a critical constraint

The review found that many ombudsman and mediation functions operate with limited human and financial resources, often with only one ombudsperson and minimal administrative support. While the 2015 JIU report provided benchmarks, the scope of the function has since expanded, requiring broader capacities to meet increasing demands. Resource constraints have led to gaps in regional presence, outreach, training, and in-person services. In some cases, financial pressures have resulted in downgrading or leaving key posts vacant. The Inspector emphasizes the need for a reassessment of resourcing, especially in the current challenging context when the need for robust, independent and effective accountability and integrity functions is more critical than ever **(Recommendation 7)**.

The Office of the Ombudsman for the Funds and Programmes continues to face issues related to its funding arrangement. Despite the cost-sharing agreed in a memorandum of understanding among the five organizations, inconsistent implementation have affected service delivery. The Inspector calls for action to ensure funding in compliance with the agreement **(Recommendation 8)**. In case the issues persist, she suggests exploring alternative arrangements, including integration into UNOMS.

The review also found that not all heads of ombudsman and mediation functions have full authority to manage their allocated resources, limiting operational autonomy and flexibility.

8. Outreach and awareness-raising efforts vary

While outreach activities have increased since 2015, awareness of the ombudsman and mediation function remains inconsistent in the organizations. Initiatives such as the “Informal First” campaign and Respectful Workplace Facilitator programmes have shown promise, but their reach and impact vary. The tone set by senior leadership plays a critical role in promoting the use of informal conflict resolution services.





Approach & Methodology

The review was conducted in accordance with the JIU Statute and its internal regulations. Its scope was system-wide, encompassing the United Nations Secretariat, its departments and offices, the United Nations funds and programmes, specialized agencies, other United Nations bodies and entities, and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

A mixed-method approach was applied, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, and drew on multiple sources, including:



A **desk review** of relevant documents, including annual reports, staff rules and regulations, standard operating procedures, terms of reference, recommendations issued by oversight bodies, and other internal and external documents, as well as previous JIU reports.



A **corporate questionnaire** was distributed to JIU participating organizations, with two versions: one designed for organizations with an ombudsman and mediation function, and another for those without such a function.



Interviews with 177 individuals from 22 participating organizations (in-person or remotely). Interviews included individuals from ombudsman and mediation offices, executive management, human resources, legal services, and staff associations.



For comparative purposes, informal conflict resolution mechanisms at the IMF, OECD and World Bank were also examined.



What the JIU recommends (formal recommendations)

The review contains 8 formal recommendations, seven of which are addressed to executive heads and 1 to the executive boards of UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN-Women. These are complemented by 18 informal recommendations.

1

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations with an internal stand-alone ombudsman and mediation function who have not yet done so should, by the end of 2027, develop and adopt formal terms of reference in consultation with the function and other relevant stakeholders, including staff representatives.

2

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should, by the end of 2027, include the active participation of staff representatives in the selection and appointment process of the heads of their ombudsman and mediation functions, as well as in decisions concerning their dismissal or removal.

3

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should, by the end of 2027, establish term limits of a minimal duration of four years for renewable terms and a maximum duration of seven years for non-renewable terms for the heads of their ombudsman and mediation functions, with a post-employment restriction within the same organization.



What the JIU recommends (formal recommendations)

4

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should, with immediate effect, ensure that the contracts of newly appointed heads of ombudsman and mediation functions are issued for a full term.

5

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should ensure that, by the end of 2027, the annual reports of their ombudsman and mediation functions are submitted to their respective governing bodies or legislative organs, to enhance transparency and accountability.

6

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should, by the end of 2027, make the annual reports of their ombudsman and mediation functions publicly available to enhance transparency and accountability and promote broader awareness of the function.

7

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should review the human and financial resources of their respective ombudsman and mediation functions regularly to ensure that the functions are adequately equipped to fulfil their mandate. This review should take into account geographical dispersion of the workforce, linguistic diversity and the full range of responsibilities.

8

The Executive Boards of UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN Women should ensure that the office of their ombudsman is provided with the required resources in line with the provisions of the memorandum of understanding.



2024-2025 JIU Reports and Notes

Reports:

- JIU/REP/2025/4** (Comparative analysis) & **JIU/REP/2025/4** [Expanded report] (Comparative tables),
Review of the policies and practices for determining the rates of programme support costs in organizations of the United Nations system
- JIU/REP/2025/3** & **JIU/REP/2025/3** [Expanded report],
Review of donor-led assessments of United Nations system organizations and other oversight-related requests from donors in the context of funding agreements and the United Nations single audit principle
- JIU/REP/2025/2** & **JIU/REP/2025/2** [Expanded report],
Review of policies and practices to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse in the United Nations system organizations
- JIU/REP/2025/1** & **JIU/REP/2025/1** [Expanded report],
Review of management and administration in the United Nations Environment Programme
- JIU/REP/2024/4**, Review of the implementation of the principle of mutual recognition within the United Nations system
- JIU/REP/2024/3** Part I (Comparative analysis) & **JIU/REP/2024/3** Part II (Reference tables),
Budgeting in organizations of the United Nations system Part II (Reference tables)
- JIU/REP/2024/2**, Review of consideration of and action taken on the reports and recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit by United Nations system organizations
- JIU/REP/2024/1**, Review of management and administration in the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women)



For all reports visit: <https://www.unjiu.org/content/reports>

Notes:

- JIU/NOTE/2024/2**, Note to the International Telecommunication Union from the review of the quality, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of health insurance schemes in the United Nations system organizations
- JIU/NOTE/2024/1**, Note to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees from the review of quality, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of health insurance schemes in the United Nations system organizations



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The Joint Inspection Unit is the only independent external oversight body of the United Nations system mandated to conduct evaluations, inspections and investigations system-wide.

Visit the JIU website for more information at www.unjiu.org or please contact jiucommunications@un.org

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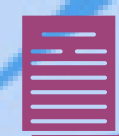
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Main
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2025 Programme of
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28 Participating
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